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SUBJECT: OBASANJO TASKS NORTHERN GOVERNORS: IMPROVE  
DEPLORABLE HEALTH AND EDUCATION CONDITIONS

REF: ABUJA 1384

1. (SBU) Summary: At the Presidential Villa on August 8, President Obasanjo tasked several northern Governors with improving their states' poor social conditions. In group discussions, attendees agreed that public health services had collapsed, and that local government had failed to deliver services. Obasanjo said that savings from debt relief would be redirected to primary health care. End Summary.
2. (SBU) On August 8, President Obasanjo invited the Charge d'Affaires and the AID Mission Director to a meeting between the President and the Governors of several northern Nigerian states, as the President had said at a July 27 meeting regarding the poor state of health and education services in Northern Nigeria (reftel). Poloff served as notetaker.
3. (SBU) The meeting took place in the Council Chambers, a large conference room at the Presidential Villa in Abuja. About 60 attendees were seated around a U-shaped table with the President at the head. Another 30-40 attendees filled other seats in the room. Present were the state Governors of Kano, Sokoto, Katsina, Kebbi, Gombe, Adamawa, and Borno, the Deputy Governor of Kaduna, the Ministers of Health, Women's Affairs, and Education, numerous Advisors and Special Advisors, a traditional ruler from the Sokoto Caliphate, an Anglican bishop, and many Local Government Area (LGA) representatives. From the "donor community" (as President Obasanjo called the non-Nigerians present) were the Mission team, a DFID officer, and representatives of WHO, UNICEF, and UNDP.
4. (SBU) Obasanjo distributed copies of the six-page USAID map presentation that showed worse social indicators in the north of the country than in the south, and worse indicators for Nigeria overall than many of its West African neighbors. He stressed that the data came from "our own figures, not from abroad." (Note: The source document for the USAID analysis was the Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey, published in 2004 by the Nigerian National Population Commission with USAID technical assistance. End Note) He read many of the statistics on the maps, highlighting the areas where Nigeria or northern Nigeria was underperforming. For example, he pointed out that child mortality in Nigeria was higher than in Cameroon and asked, "How can anyone say that we are poorer than Cameroon?" He went on to say that Nigeria's immunization rate was lower than "Cameroon, Ghana...even Benin Republic," his mention of Benin drawing laughter.
5. (SBU) Obasanjo listed the many different officials, agencies, and commissions represented at the meeting, and stressed that these social problems required "all hands on deck." He told a joke about a prayer that ended, "and God, this is important; don't send your son!" When the laughter stopped, he directed the northern Governors, "this is important; don't send your Deputy Governors." He turned to the chief executive of the National Program of Immunization (NPI) and sarcastically asked, "What does NPI stand for? Oh yes, immunization." He began the open discussion by asking what the Governors planned to do.
6. (SBU) The group then spent the next 90 minutes discussing the problems with the health sector. One conclusion reached was that the LGA structure was simply not working: services were not being delivered, and federal funds were being wasted by LGAs. Regarding the health care sector, the Minister of Health said that the primary health care system, for which LGAs were responsible, "has collapsed totally." The Katsina Governor agreed that "LGAs are not functioning," and that any policy that relies upon LGAs to perform is a "defective policy." Obasanjo finished the health care discussion by directing that efforts be coordinated at zonal level, and that the group meet again in six

months and report their progress to the President.  
(Note: "Zones" are the six geo-political regions of Nigeria: the Northwest, the Northeast, the North-Central or "Middle Belt," the Southwest, the Southeast or "Igboland," and the South-South or "the Niger Delta." End Note)

17. (SBU) Note: In a meeting with the NPI chief executive two days later, the USAID Director was told that, after the President closed the meeting, most of the Governors and the health officials continued past midnight in a discussion of how to respond to the President's challenge to upgrade health conditions in the North. End Note.

18. (SBU) The Minister of Health suggested that the GON create a Primary Care Trust Fund, similar to the Education Trust Fund. Obasanjo answered, "You won't get what you are suggesting," but said that savings from debt relief would be redirected to primary health care.

19. (SBU) When the discussion moved to the education sector, the group agreed that there was a shortage of teachers. Obasanjo felt inadequate school meals were a problem and held the Governors responsible for achieving the goal of "one good meal a day." When the discussion turned to why girls do not attend school in the North, Obasanjo faced the governors and told them "You know why they don't," referring to cultural practices that discourage girls' attendance. Obasanjo said to the governors, "You were elected to do the hard things, not just to be popular. You must do the hard things for this generation and for the coming generation."

110. (SBU) Obasanjo added that infectious diseases were a problem, and if Nigeria could make progress against HIV/AIDS, malaria, and tuberculosis, average "life expectancy would increase by four years."

111. (SBU) Comment: The most significant thing about this meeting is that it happened. These problems have been overlooked for many years. Some observers believe political discontent in the North is fueled by inadequate delivery of social services. The President has now acknowledged serious shortcomings in the nation's health and education systems with an emphasis on the North. He directed all three levels of government (Federal, State, Local) to work together to improve things in the North and report back to him at six month intervals. It is encouraging that he said Federal funds would be allocated and that he would hold the Governors accountable for progress. End Comment.

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